

From Welcome to Weariness: Understanding Integration Fatigue in Contemporary Europe: A Conceptual Exploration of Emotional, Institutional, and Societal Exhaustion (with a Focus on Western and Northern European Societies, 2019–2025)

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Abstract— This conceptual paper examines the emerging phenomenon of integration fatigue in contemporary Europe, with a focus on Western and Northern societies between 2019 and 2025. Once characterised by solidarity and empathy during the 2015 refugee influx (Triandafyllidou, 2018), Europe now faces emotional, institutional, and societal exhaustion. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from migration, psychology, and sociology (Betts, 2021; Miller and Goodman, 2022), the study proposes a three-dimensional framework of integration fatigue: emotional fatigue (the decline of public empathy and compassion) (Bauman, 2019), institutional fatigue (policy overload and bureaucratic stagnation) (Scholten and Penninx, 2020), and societal fatigue (polarisation and the erosion of collective trust) (Eberl et al., 2021). The paper argues that the COVID-19 pandemic intensified pre-existing strains (Dahlberg et al., 2022), transforming integration from a hopeful moral project into a contested, draining process. Rather than viewing fatigue merely as resistance, this article interprets it as a symptom of overextended emotional and institutional capacities (Kleist, 2023). It concludes by suggesting that “sustainable integration energy” requires renewed emotional literacy, resilient governance, and inclusive communication strategies (Isin and Nyers, 2020; Favell, 2023). By reframing fatigue as both a challenge and a diagnostic tool, this study contributes to understanding Europe’s shifting integration landscape and offers new directions for theory and policy.

Keywords— Integration fatigue; Emotional exhaustion; Institutional resilience; Migration policy; Europe 2019–2025.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 From Solidarity to Fatigue: Shifting European Attitudes

In the mid-2010s, Europe was often celebrated for its *welcome culture*, a collective expression of humanitarian solidarity towards refugees and migrants (Triandafyllidou, 2018; Goodman, 2020). Germany’s “Wir schaffen das” and Sweden’s open-door stance symbolised a continent that prioritised empathy and moral responsibility (Krzyżanowski, 2020). However, by the late 2010s and especially after 2019, these narratives began to fade (Börzel and Risse, 2021).

The combined pressures of economic uncertainty, rising populism, and the COVID-19 pandemic have contributed to what scholars describe as integration fatigue, a sense of emotional, institutional, and societal weariness towards migration and diversity management (Kleist, 2023; Betts, 2021). This shift does not simply reflect hostility or xenophobia; rather, it reveals a deeper exhaustion across emotional and structural levels (Eberl et al., 2021). Governments face administrative overload (Scholten and Penninx, 2020), welfare systems struggle with stretched resources (Favell, 2023), and communities experience a decline in compassion (Bauman, 2019).

As public empathy weakens, integration risks becoming a bureaucratic duty rather than a social commitment (Miller

and Goodman, 2022). Understanding this transition from solidarity to fatigue is crucial for reimagining integration not as a burden but as a sustainable process rooted in emotional literacy and collective resilience (Isin and Nyers, 2020).

1.2 Why Post-2019 Matters: The Pandemic and Policy Exhaustion

The period following 2019 marked a turning point in Europe's integration landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic did not create integration fatigue, but it profoundly magnified existing strains across emotional, institutional, and social domains (Kleist, 2023; Dahlberg et al., 2022). Lockdowns, restricted mobility, and economic insecurity reshaped the contours of belonging and intensified divisions between citizens and migrants (Favell, 2023). Migrant populations were disproportionately affected by health risks and job precarity, while host societies experienced growing anxiety about resource distribution and welfare sustainability (Betts, 2021).

Public narratives that once centred on solidarity and humanitarian values shifted towards self-protection, national resilience, and border control (Börzel and Risse, 2021; Triandafyllidou, 2022). This shift gradually eroded the moral energy that had sustained earlier efforts at integration. Institutions that were already struggling with bureaucratic complexity and inconsistent policy coordination began to display clear signs of policy fatigue, an administrative weariness caused by repeated policy reforms and contradictory objectives (Scholten and Penninx, 2020; Goodman, 2020).

Moreover, the pandemic revealed a form of *emotional bureaucracy* (Miller and Goodman, 2022), in which frontline workers, educators, and social service providers became emotionally drained while attempting to maintain inclusion under crisis conditions. The post-pandemic years have thus exposed the limits of Europe's integration machinery: a structure overextended by overlapping crises, from public health emergencies to renewed migration inflows and geopolitical instability (Eberl et al., 2021; Isin and Nyers, 2020).

Understanding the post-2019 period as both a rupture and a mirror allows scholars to trace how compassion, governance, and societal trust have evolved under continuous strain. It is within this context that *integration fatigue* emerges not merely as political disinterest but as a deeper psychosocial phenomenon embedded in the European experience of crisis and recovery (Bauman, 2019; Kleist, 2023).

1.3 Research Aim and Conceptual Relevance

The primary aim of this conceptual paper is to develop a multidimensional understanding of *integration fatigue* in

contemporary Europe by linking emotional, institutional, and societal forms of exhaustion within a shared analytical framework. While previous studies have explored specific aspects of migration governance, such as policy failure, populist backlash, or declining solidarity (Favell, 2023; Börzel and Risse, 2021), few have examined how these elements converge to produce a pervasive sense of weariness across Europe's integration systems (Kleist, 2023).

This article argues that *integration fatigue* should not be dismissed as a temporary reaction to crisis but recognised as a structural condition emerging from cumulative emotional and administrative overload (Scholten and Penninx, 2020; Dahlberg et al., 2022). By synthesising perspectives from migration studies, sociology of emotion, and policy theory, the paper seeks to conceptualise fatigue as both an outcome and a diagnostic indicator of Europe's shifting moral and institutional capacities (Bauman, 2019; Miller and Goodman, 2022).

Conceptually, the study contributes to a growing body of literature that views integration not merely as an institutional mechanism but as a *moral economy of empathy* (Isin and Nyers, 2020; Triandafyllidou, 2022). Understanding fatigue through this lens enables a re-evaluation of how emotions, governance, and social trust interact under sustained pressure. The analysis is thus situated within the post-2019 European context (2019–2025), where successive crises, pandemics, economic disruptions, and geopolitical instabilities have tested the endurance of integration systems (Eberl et al., 2021).

Ultimately, the paper's relevance lies in offering a *conceptual bridge* between the emotional and institutional dimensions of integration. By doing so, it provides a foundation for future empirical research and policy dialogue on how Europe might renew its commitment to inclusion without succumbing to exhaustion (Betts, 2021; Goodman, 2020).

II. CONCEPTUALISING INTEGRATION FATIGUE

The previous sections outlined how integration fatigue has been defined and situated within emotional, institutional, and societal dimensions. These perspectives suggest that fatigue should not be viewed as a single or isolated condition, but rather as a dynamic process that circulates between feelings, structures, and collective attitudes (Hochschild, 2019; Scholten and Penninx, 2020; Eberl et al., 2021; Kleist, 2023). This conceptual foundation enables the view that integration fatigue is a multi-layered phenomenon shaped by the interplay of emotional, bureaucratic, and social forces.

2.1 Defining Integration Fatigue

The concept of *integration fatigue* refers to a growing sense of exhaustion, both emotional and institutional, experienced by both host communities and policy systems in managing diversity and migration (Kleist, 2023; Favell, 2023). While not yet a fully theorised construct, it draws on related concepts such as *compassion fatigue* (Figley, 2018), *policy fatigue* (Scholten and Penninx, 2020), and *empathy decline* (Bauman, 2019). Integration fatigue thus captures the emotional desensitisation, bureaucratic stagnation, and social weariness that emerge when the moral and administrative energies sustaining integration become depleted.

This fatigue does not imply rejection of migrants per se but highlights a deeper ambivalence within European societies that oscillates between humanitarian ideals and policy pragmatism (Triandafyllidou, 2022; Börzel and Risse, 2021). As integration becomes institutionalised, its affective power weakens, empathy turns procedural, and inclusion becomes transactional rather than relational (Goodman, 2020). The term, therefore, reflects a condition of *emotional overextension*: societies that have cared too intensely, too long, and too unevenly, leading to burnout among both institutions and individuals (Miller and Goodman, 2022).

Conceptually, *integration fatigue* offers a diagnostic lens for interpreting Europe's shifting integration discourse. It invites scholars to move beyond the binary of "successful vs. failed integration" and instead interrogate the *emotional sustainability* of inclusion efforts (Betts, 2021; Isin and Nyers, 2020).

2.2 Theoretical Roots: Emotional, Institutional, and Societal Dimensions

The theoretical grounding of integration fatigue lies at the intersection of emotional sociology, migration governance, and social psychology. From an emotional standpoint, it builds upon theories of *compassion fatigue* and *emotional labour*, which describe the psychological toll of prolonged empathy in social and professional contexts (Hochschild,

2019; Figley, 2018). Applied to migration, this lens helps explain how sustained exposure to crisis narratives, refugee arrivals, humanitarian appeals, and political debates can lead to public desensitisation and empathy depletion (Bauman, 2019; Krzyżanowski, 2020).

Institutionally, the concept connects to debates on *policy fatigue*, defined as the diminishing effectiveness of repeated or fragmented integration policies (Scholten and Penninx, 2020; Goodman, 2020). Over time, continuous reforms, inconsistent objectives, and resource strain contribute to administrative inertia, resulting in what Dahlberg et al. (2022) term *bureaucratic exhaustion*.

At the societal level, integration fatigue intersects with *trust erosion* and *polarisation theories* (Eberl et al., 2021). Societies under sustained strain, economic crises, populist politics, and pandemic anxiety experience what Isin and Nyers (2020) call a *civic fatigue*, where the collective willingness to engage in solidarity weakens. These emotional, institutional, and societal dimensions together form an integrated analytical framework that situates fatigue as both a symptom and a signal of Europe's transformation in the post-2019 era.

2.3 Integration Fatigue as a Multi-Layered Phenomenon

Integration fatigue operates across interconnected layers that reinforce one another. Emotional exhaustion within individuals and communities often triggers institutional stagnation, which in turn amplifies societal polarisation (Kleist, 2023; Eberl et al., 2021). This recursive relationship forms a *fatigue cycle* where compassion wanes, bureaucratic systems harden, and social trust erodes.

Drawing from emotional sociology and governance theory (Hochschild, 2019; Scholten and Penninx, 2020), this paper conceptualises integration fatigue as a *multi-layered phenomenon* that extends beyond policy efficiency to encompass collective feelings and moral capacities. Each layer represents both a site of strain and a potential point of renewal.

Table 1. Dimensions of Integration Fatigue in Contemporary Europe (2019–2025)

Dimension	Core Features	Manifestations in Post-2019 Europe	Representative Sources
Emotional Fatigue	Decline of public empathy, compassion fatigue among citizens and practitioners	Desensitisation to refugee crises; media fatigue; emotional burnout in social services	Figley (2018); Bauman (2019); Miller and Goodman (2022)
Institutional Fatigue	Bureaucratic overload; repetitive policy reforms; loss of innovation energy	Fragmented integration frameworks; short-term projects; policy recycling	Scholten and Penninx (2020); Dahlberg et al. (2022).
Societal Fatigue	Polarisation; distrust in multiculturalism; civic disengagement	Normalisation of anti-immigrant rhetoric; declining social cohesion	Eberl et al. (2021); Isin and Nyers (2020); Favell (2023)

Integration fatigue, therefore, is not a static condition but a dynamic process of reciprocal depletion. Recognising this cyclical nature allows policymakers and scholars to identify *intervention points* where renewal can begin, through emotional literacy programs, institutional reflection, or community-based trust restoration (Favell, 2023; Isin and Nyers, 2020).

2.4 Emotional and Institutional Dynamics of Integration

The dynamics of integration in post-2019 Europe can be understood within a broader emotional and institutional framework. Emotional, institutional, and societal energies continuously interact to shape how integration unfolds over time. Emotional energy refers to empathy, compassion, and care within communities. Across European societies, emotional energy has weakened due to a decline in empathy and compassion fatigue; yet it remains renewable through care ethics and emotional literacy (Figley, 2018; Bauman, 2019; Miller and Goodman, 2022).

Institutional energy refers to how governments, educational systems, and policy networks respond to the increasing complexity of migration. Bureaucratic pressures and policy repetition often limit flexibility, but reflective and adaptive governance can restore trust and effectiveness (Scholten and Penninx, 2020; Dahlberg et al., 2022). Societal energy concerns public attitudes and social cohesion. Rising polarisation and distrust reduce collective engagement, but renewal becomes possible through civic imagination and community participation (Eberl et al., 2021; Favell, 2023; Kleist, 2023).

Together, these emotional, institutional, and societal dimensions create a circular flow of depletion and renewal. When empathy is strengthened, institutions become more responsive, and communities more inclusive. This process can be described as a regeneration of integration energy, where emotional care, flexible governance, and civic participation sustain the long-term well-being of both migrants and host societies (Kleist, 2023; Isin and Nyers, 2020; Papadopoulos, 2021).

III. DIMENSIONS OF EXHAUSTION

Integration fatigue unfolds through three interrelated dimensions —emotional, institutional, and societal —each reflecting a distinctive yet connected form of exhaustion. These dimensions do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact in a feedback loop where the decline of empathy undermines institutional innovation, and bureaucratic stagnation, in turn, erodes social trust (Kleist, 2023; Betts, 2021). Examining these layers separately enables a deeper understanding of how fatigue spreads across Europe's integration systems in the post-2019 period.

3.1 Emotional Fatigue: The Erosion of Empathy and Compassion

Emotional fatigue represents the affective foundation of integration exhaustion. It captures the gradual decline of public empathy, compassion, and moral motivation that once sustained Europe's "welcome culture" (Triandafyllidou, 2018; Krzyżanowski, 2020). During the height of the refugee arrivals, emotional solidarity functioned as a moral resource for social inclusion. Yet over time, continuous exposure to humanitarian crises, negative media portrayals, and populist discourse led to desensitisation and what Figley (2018) terms *compassion fatigue*.

In the post-2019 context, the COVID-19 pandemic further depleted emotional reserves. Social isolation, health anxiety, and economic stress shifted public attention inward, reducing collective emotional energy for empathy and cross-cultural understanding (Dahlberg et al., 2022; Bauman, 2019). As Favell (2023) notes, when empathy becomes institutionalised through bureaucratic mechanisms, it risks turning procedural rather than heartfelt. Teachers, social workers, and community volunteers, once emotional mediators of inclusion, reported burnout and disillusionment (Miller and Goodman, 2022).

This emotional fatigue also manifests at the political level. Leaders increasingly adopt pragmatic, crisis-oriented rhetoric, replacing earlier moral narratives with "realist" or security-focused frames (Börzel and Risse, 2021). Consequently, compassion becomes episodic rather than sustained, fluctuating with media attention and political expediency. The erosion of empathy not only weakens interpersonal relations; it undermines the emotional infrastructure necessary for long-term integration. Recognising and addressing this affective depletion is thus a prerequisite for rebuilding inclusive, emotionally literate societies (Isin and Nyers, 2020).

3.2 Institutional Fatigue: Policy Overload and Bureaucratic Inertia

Institutional fatigue reflects the declining capacity of governance systems to sustain coherent, innovative, and compassionate integration policies. Across Europe, institutions once celebrated for their humanitarian coordination have become sites of *administrative exhaustion* (Scholten and Penninx, 2020). Since 2019, integration governance has faced multiple overlapping crises, pandemic management, economic recovery, and renewed migration inflows, resulting in what Dahlberg et al. (2022) describe as a "bureaucratic overload." As the number of initiatives multiplies, their coherence diminishes: short-term pilot projects replace long-term strategies, and

integration becomes fragmented across ministries and funding cycles (Favell, 2023).

Policy repetition has produced what Goodman (2020) terms *policy recycling*, the re-adoption of earlier frameworks with new terminology but similar structural weaknesses. This cycle generates a false sense of activity while masking institutional stagnation. The consequence is a form of organisational burnout: public servants, educators, and social programme coordinators operate under pressure to deliver results with diminishing emotional and financial resources (Miller and Goodman, 2022).

Furthermore, the increasing bureaucratisation of empathy, through measurable outcomes, standardised forms, and contractual obligations, has transformed inclusion into a technocratic exercise rather than a moral commitment (Bauman, 2019; Betts, 2021). Institutions now prioritise compliance over creativity, efficiency over empathy. In this context, *integration fatigue* emerges not only from policy failure but also from the accumulation of procedural weariness. As Kleist (2023) argues, integration fatigue exposes the paradox of European governance: the more institutions attempt to systematise inclusion, the more they risk depleting the moral and emotional energy that sustains it.

Reversing this trend requires a new institutional ethos, one that values emotional literacy and reflective governance alongside administrative performance (Isin and Nyers, 2020). Without such recalibration, European integration systems will continue to operate as overextended mechanisms, fatigued by their own procedural success.

3.3 Societal Fatigue: Polarisation and the Limits of Solidarity

Societal fatigue signifies the broader collective exhaustion that extends beyond individual emotions and institutional pressures. It captures the erosion of shared meaning and the weakening of social trust that once underpinned Europe's multicultural ethos (Eberl et al., 2021). Unlike emotional fatigue, which centres on empathy decline, or institutional fatigue, which concerns policy stagnation, societal fatigue unfolds within the moral and communicative fabric of everyday life. It is visible in rising polarisation, shrinking spaces for dialogue, and the normalisation of scepticism towards diversity (Börzel and Risse, 2021; Triandafyllidou, 2022).

The post-2019 era has intensified these dynamics. Economic uncertainty, digital misinformation, and populist narratives have blurred the boundary between social fatigue and social fracture (Favell, 2023). The pandemic further disrupted the collective rituals of belonging, public gatherings, cultural events, and intergroup contact, which once served as an emotional glue in plural societies

(Dahlberg et al., 2022). As these encounters diminished, imagined communities hardened, reinforcing "us versus them" distinctions and weakening the sense of mutual obligation (Betts, 2021).

Societal fatigue thus manifests not only as ideological polarisation but as a *loss of civic imagination*, the ability to envision coexistence beyond crisis management (Isin and Nyers, 2020). When societies grow accustomed to division, integration ceases to function as a transformative project and becomes a defensive one. The challenge is therefore not simply to rebuild solidarity but to *reimagine* it: cultivating spaces where emotional connection, cultural recognition, and collective purpose can regenerate (Kleist, 2023). Only through this renewal can Europe move from endurance to genuine co-existence.

3.4 Interconnections and Implications

The three layers of integration fatigue —emotional, institutional, and societal —form an intricate ecosystem rather than separate fields of strain. Emotional depletion narrows the moral bandwidth of communities, reducing the energy that institutions rely on to innovate and sustain trust. In turn, procedural rigidity within governance systems radiates frustration outward, shaping the collective mood of fatigue that saturates public life (Kleist, 2023; Betts, 2021). This interplay can be viewed as an *energy economy* of integration: when emotional and organisational reserves are consumed faster than replenished, the entire social circuitry dims (Bauman, 2019; Favell, 2023).

Yet, the same interdependence that fuels exhaustion also offers the possibility of renewal. When empathy is cultivated through education, institutional learning, and participatory dialogue, new social energy can circulate through the system (Isin and Nyers, 2020). Small-scale interactions, community classrooms, local cultural initiatives, and transnational networks can act as *micro-generators of resilience*, restoring meaning where policy structures alone fall short (Dahlberg et al., 2022). Conceptually, understanding fatigue through this relational lens transforms it from a symptom of decline into a diagnostic indicator of Europe's evolving moral metabolism. It invites a shift from measuring integration by outcomes to sustaining it through affective balance, institutional adaptability, and civic renewal (Triandafyllidou, 2022).

IV. REFRAMING INTEGRATION: TOWARDS EMOTIONAL LITERACY AND SUSTAINABLE RENEWAL

Overcoming integration fatigue requires a paradigmatic shift from reactive policymaking to reflective, emotionally

intelligent governance. Instead of merely managing diversity through bureaucratic tools, Europe must reimagine integration as a *relational process*, a continuous negotiation of emotions, ethics, and belonging (Isin and Nyers, 2020; Betts, 2021). Emotional literacy, in this context, refers to the collective ability of institutions and citizens to recognise, articulate, and respond to emotional climates that shape integration outcomes (Miller and Goodman, 2022). It is not an abstract sensitivity, but a practical skill embedded in educational, civic, and communicative practices.

Developing emotional literacy can help prevent the emotional numbness that accompanies prolonged exposure to crisis narratives (Figley, 2018; Bauman, 2019). When policy actors and educators are trained to read the emotional tone of communities, acknowledging fatigue, frustration, or hope, they can design responses that are restorative rather than extractive. This perspective positions empathy not as sentimentality but as a renewable civic resource (Triandafyllidou, 2022).

Parallel to this affective renewal, integration policy must cultivate *institutional resilience*: the capacity to adapt without collapsing under repeated shocks (Scholten and Penninx, 2020; Dahlberg et al., 2022). Resilient institutions prioritise flexibility, participatory design, and reflective evaluation over rigid compliance. Small, locally grounded initiatives, language hubs, mentoring schemes, and intercultural networks can function as nodes of innovation within fatigued systems (Favell, 2023).

Finally, sustainable integration depends on restoring *social circulation*, the flow of recognition, reciprocity, and emotional investment among groups (Kleist, 2023). When societies regain the courage to imagine belonging as a shared emotional project, they begin to transform fatigue into a new moral rhythm. This approach reframes integration not as an administrative obligation but as a living, adaptive ecosystem capable of self-renewal through empathy, reflection, and collective care (Isin and Nyers, 2020; Bauman, 2019).

4.1 Emotional Energy and the Ethics of Care in Migration Governance

The concept of emotional energy offers an important extension to understanding integration fatigue in contemporary Europe. It refers to the collective emotional vitality that sustains cooperation, trust, and the willingness to engage with difference (Collins, 2020). When emotional energy diminishes, the connective force between citizens, institutions, and migrants in relationships also loses its strength. In post-2019 Europe, this depletion has become particularly visible as repeated crises have eroded the optimism and compassion that once shaped integration discourse (Kleist, 2023). The capacity to care is not simply

an individual virtue but a shared social resource that requires continuous renewal through institutions and public narratives (Tronto, 2013; Papadopoulos, 2021).

The concept of emotional energy provides an important extension to understanding integration fatigue in contemporary Europe (Collins, 2020; Kleist, 2023).

The ethics of care provides a theoretical lens through which this emotional dimension can be reframed. Unlike abstract moral theories based on duty or utility, care ethics situates moral responsibility in interdependence, empathy, and responsiveness to human vulnerability (Gilligan, 2018). Within migration governance, this perspective recognises that both migrants and host societies occupy fragile moral positions shaped by uncertainty, dependency, and fatigue. To sustain integration, therefore, emotional energy must be treated not as a private sentiment but as a form of civic infrastructure. As Tronto (2013) argues, societies that neglect care eventually weaken their democratic and ethical foundations.

Policies that cultivate emotional literacy and care-based leadership can counterbalance the technocratic tendencies of modern governance. Emotional energy is replenished when institutions engage citizens as moral participants rather than administrative clients (Isin and Nyers, 2020). Local initiatives that foreground shared experiences, intercultural storytelling, mentorship networks, and participatory urban projects demonstrate how emotional connection can repair frayed social fabrics (Favell, 2023). These practices move beyond empathy as a feeling toward empathy as a civic act, embedding compassion in public life through collective rituals of recognition and reciprocity (Bauman, 2019).

At the policy level, the ethics of care suggests a reorientation of integration frameworks from managing difference to sustaining relational wellbeing. This involves rethinking evaluation metrics: instead of measuring success through economic participation or linguistic attainment alone, attention must also be paid to affective indicators such as belonging, dignity, and mutual trust (Scholten and Penninx, 2020; Dahlberg et al., 2022). When emotional energy is cultivated through education, cultural institutions, and community participation, integration becomes less about endurance and more about relational flourishing.

The post-pandemic years have revealed that emotional energy is both finite and renewable. It diminishes under chronic stress but can regenerate through recognition and shared purpose. A care-oriented approach thus shifts the focus of migration governance from controlling populations to maintaining humane connections. Rather than viewing exhaustion as an endpoint, this framework invites Europe to view care as the core of resilience: a moral practice through

which empathy, solidarity, and belonging can be continually reimagined (Papadopoulos, 2021; Kleist, 2023).

V. CONCLUSION: BEYOND WEARINESS – RETHINKING HOPE AND COEXISTENCE IN EUROPE

Integration fatigue, as explored across this paper, reveals more than a temporary social tiredness; it exposes the moral metabolism of a continent negotiating its limits of empathy and endurance (Kleist, 2023; Bauman, 2019). Europe's post-2019 experience demonstrates that when emotional, institutional, and societal energies fall out of sync, inclusion becomes unsustainable. Yet fatigue, rather than signifying failure, can also act as a mirror reflecting where recalibration is needed. Recognising exhaustion is the first step toward renewal.

The conceptual framework proposed here, the triadic model of emotional, institutional, and societal fatigue, highlights how integration processes depend not only on policy coherence but on emotional sustainability and civic imagination (Isin and Nyers, 2020; Betts, 2021). The erosion of empathy, bureaucratic rigidity, and polarisation are not isolated phenomena; they are intertwined consequences of overextended moral and administrative effort. By reframing fatigue as a relational dynamic rather than a static decline, the paper encourages migration scholars to treat weariness as both an analytical category and a call to reimagine the emotional architecture of integration.

Moving beyond weariness requires shifting attention from crisis management to *coexistence cultivation*—a process of rebuilding shared meaning, restoring emotional reciprocity, and fostering institutional humility (Favell, 2023; Triandafyllidou, 2022). Europe's challenge is not simply to welcome or manage migrants, but to sustain the emotional and ethical vitality that makes such inclusion possible. Future research may therefore explore how micro-level practices, community dialogue, intercultural pedagogy, and narrative exchange contribute to resilience within fatigued societies (Miller and Goodman, 2022; Dahlberg et al., 2022).

Ultimately, the way forward lies in cultivating an emotionally literate Europe: one capable of feeling without fracturing, governing without hardening, and coexisting without exhaustion. Through this lens, fatigue becomes not the end of solidarity, but the threshold of a more reflective and sustainable form of belonging.

5.1 Policy and Research Implications

Integration fatigue, while often discussed at a conceptual level, carries profound implications for both public policy

and academic inquiry. Recognising fatigue as a multidimensional condition, encompassing emotional, institutional, and societal aspects, requires rethinking how integration is governed, evaluated, and studied in Europe's post-2019 context (Kleist, 2023; Favell, 2023). Policy responses must move beyond administrative efficiency to consider how social systems distribute not only resources but also emotional energy and moral attention. When policies overlook these affective dimensions, they risk reproducing the very exhaustion they seek to alleviate (Betts, 2021).

One major implication concerns the need for *emotionally intelligent governance*. Institutions that acknowledge emotional climates, public anxiety, declining compassion, and erosion of trust can develop more adaptive and humane responses. Training programmes for public servants, educators, and local authorities should include components on emotional literacy and intercultural communication (Isin and Nyers, 2020). These skills enable practitioners to recognise when fatigue manifests as frustration, avoidance, or apathy and to respond with empathy rather than procedural rigidity. Emotional awareness also enhances crisis preparedness by ensuring that communication remains grounded in respect and care, even during periods of political tension or social unrest (Miller and Goodman, 2022).

Another policy dimension involves designing integration frameworks. Current systems often prioritise measurable outputs, such as employment or language proficiency, while neglecting intangible yet critical outcomes, like belonging and trust (Scholten and Penninx, 2020). Policy renewal should adopt a *relational metrics* approach, evaluating the quality of interaction between migrants and institutions rather than counting isolated achievements. Incorporating participatory assessment tools, such as focus groups, narrative evaluations, and community-led surveys, would allow for more responsive governance that captures both emotional realities and administrative results (Dahlberg et al., 2022).

Education and media also play pivotal roles in mitigating fatigue. Schools, adult learning centres, and universities can function as laboratories of empathy, where intercultural competence and critical emotional reflection are cultivated (Triandafyllidou, 2022). Public media outlets, similarly, can counter empathy erosion by highlighting stories of resilience and cooperation instead of crisis-driven narratives. By shifting representation from suffering to contribution, such practices restore a sense of shared agency and positive affect in the public imagination (Bauman, 2019).

At the community level, *micro-integrative practices*, local mentoring schemes, storytelling festivals, and volunteering networks help disperse the concentration of emotional labour that burdens institutions (Papadopoulos, 2021). When care responsibilities are distributed through civil society, emotional energy becomes renewable rather than extractive. These initiatives decentralise integration from government offices to everyday social spaces, allowing fatigue to be absorbed and transformed through collective participation (Favell, 2023).

For researchers, integration fatigue presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Methodologically, future studies should move beyond policy analysis to include emotional ethnography, discourse analysis, and participatory action research (Kleist, 2023). Such approaches can capture the lived experience of exhaustion and renewal as they unfold within communities. Longitudinal and comparative research could trace how fatigue patterns vary across regions, comparing Northern, Western, and Southern European contexts, to reveal how political culture and welfare regimes mediate resilience. Scholars may also examine the role of digital communication and social media in amplifying or mitigating fatigue by influencing emotional discourse surrounding migration (Eberl et al., 2021).

Finally, a renewed partnership between academia and policy practice is essential. Universities, think tanks, and local authorities can co-create evidence-based strategies to monitor integration energy and develop early-warning indicators for fatigue. These collaborations can ensure that integration remains not merely a bureaucratic goal but a living, adaptive social process grounded in empathy, learning, and reflection (Isin and Nyers, 2020; Betts, 2021).

By embedding emotional intelligence, participatory design, and reflective evaluation into Europe's integration landscape, policymakers and researchers can jointly move the conversation from fatigue to regeneration. This approach reframes policy not as a control mechanism but as a collective act of care through which social cohesion and moral resilience can be sustained (Papadopoulos, 2021; Favell, 2023).

VI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As a conceptual inquiry, this study's strength lies in its interpretive synthesis rather than empirical verification. Yet, this focus also establishes certain limitations that future research must address. By analysing integration fatigue through the lenses of emotional, institutional, and societal exhaustion, the paper offers a broad analytical framework but does not empirically test its mechanisms. Future studies

could therefore operationalise the concept of fatigue using mixed methodologies, combining discourse analysis, ethnography, and policy evaluation, to trace how exhaustion is experienced, communicated, and institutionalised across different European contexts (Scholten and Penninx, 2020; Kleist, 2023).

Another limitation concerns geographical scope. While the analysis primarily focused on Western and Northern Europe, integration fatigue may manifest differently in Southern and Eastern regions where migration histories, welfare regimes, and civic cultures diverge (Triandafyllidou, 2022; Eberl et al., 2021). Comparative investigations could reveal whether emotional resilience and policy adaptability vary according to socio-economic and cultural structures. Such cross-regional perspectives would help determine whether integration fatigue is a pan-European phenomenon or one shaped by specific governance models.

Conceptually, the model developed here privileges emotional and relational interpretations. This emphasis may overlook structural and material dimensions such as economic precarity, housing inequality, and digital misinformation, all of which influence the texture of social fatigue (Favell, 2023). Integrating political economy and media analysis would enrich our understanding of how power and communication sustain or deplete the energy of integration. Similarly, more attention could be devoted to intersectional aspects, including gender, religion, class, and ethnicity, which mediate how fatigue is experienced by both migrants and host societies (Isin and Nyers, 2020).

Longitudinal research could further explore the temporal rhythms of fatigue and recovery. Rather than treating exhaustion as a static condition, future work might examine its oscillations over time, how compassion revives after crises, how institutions recover legitimacy, and how societies rebuild moral focus (Betts, 2021; Bauman, 2019). This temporal approach would move the debate beyond crisis-driven narratives and illuminate the cyclical nature of social energy in Europe's integration landscape.

Finally, there is a need to bridge the conceptual and policy worlds. Academic discussions of integration fatigue risk remain detached from practical policymaking unless translated into actionable frameworks. Collaborative platforms involving scholars, civil society organisations, and local authorities could pilot new approaches grounded in emotional literacy, participatory evaluation, and care-oriented governance (Papadopoulos, 2021; Dahlberg et al., 2022). Through such partnerships, theory and practice can inform one another, creating a dynamic cycle of reflection and renewal.

In essence, the limitations of this study point not to weaknesses but to potential avenues for improvement. Integration fatigue, as articulated here, is an evolving concept that reflects Europe's emotional and moral transformations. Future research should continue to refine its contours, testing its explanatory value while expanding its ethical and empirical reach. By doing so, scholars and practitioners alike can contribute to building a Europe that not only learns to manage diversity but also sustains the emotional imagination required for coexistence.

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